

www.ijip.in | ISSN 2348-5396 (e), ISSN: 2349-3429 (p)

Volume 3, Issue 4, July 2016 | Special Issue

No. 62

FACTORS AFFECTING DISSOLUTION OF RELATIONSHIPS AMONG NON RESIDENT INDIANS

PRANEET KAUR

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The International Journal of
INDIAN PSYCHOLOGY

Volume 3

I s s u e - 4, N o. 6 2

**Factors affecting Dissolution of Relationships among Non
Resident Indians**

July, 2016

Praneet Kaur

San Jose State University

Department of Communication Studies, India

THE INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF INDIAN PSYCHOLOGY

This Issue (Volume 3, Issue 4, Special Issue 62) Published, July, 2016

Headquarters;

REDSHINE Publication, 88, Patel Street, Navamuvada, Lunawada, Gujarat, India, 389230

Customer Care: +91 99 98 447091

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ISSN (Online) 2348-5396

ISSN (Print) 2349-3429

ZDB: 2775190-9

IDN: 1052425984

CODEN: IJIPD3

OCLC: 882110133

WorldCat Accession: (DE-600) ZDB2775190-9

ROAR ID: 9235

Impact Factor: 4.50 (ICI)

DIP: 18.01.301/20160304

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Price: 500 INR/- | \$ 8.00 USD

2016 Edition

Website: www.ijip.in

Email: info.ijip@gmail.com | journal@ijip.in

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Publishing fees, ₹ 500 OR \$ 15 USD only (online and print both)

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The International Journal of Indian Psychology welcomes submissions that explore the social, educational and psychological aspects of human behavior as related to human. Because The International Journal of Indian Psychology takes a broad and inclusive view of the study of both psychology and social science, this publication outlet is suitable for a wide variety of interests. Appropriate submissions could include general survey research, attitudinal measures, research in which criminal justice practitioners are participants, investigations into broad societal issues, or any number of empirical approaches that fit within the general umbrella provided by the journal.

At last, our thanks go out to the members of the journal who have done their best to work at this collaborative effort. May you continue in this wonderful spirit, which, we are sure will sustain your efforts in the future towards enhancing and enriching this journal.

Prof. Suresh Makvana, PhD¹
(Editor in Chief)

¹ ksmnortol@gmail.com

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The present issue of the journal is edited & published by RED'SHINE Publication (A unit of RED'MAGIC Networks. Inc) at 86/Shardhdha, 88/Navamuvada, Lunawada, Gujarat-India, 389230

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INTRODUCTION

Interpersonal communication research has sufficiently emphasized relationship development and maintenance strategies; that is, how parties sustain and preserve the quality of their established relationships (Baxter, 1982). While the bulk of extant work is limited to the early stages of development and maintenance, little research has examined the dissolution stage, or more specifically, the role that culture plays in relationship dissolution.

Throughout my graduate career at San Jose State University (SJSU), I have been drawn to understand the complex relationships between culture and communication. As a person of Indian origin, I have observed an increasing number of dissolved relationships in my community over the past few years. This has been especially prominent among Indian immigrants in the United States, referred to as NRIs (Non Resident Indians). Indians are reported to have a negligible divorce rate. For example Bose (2006) reports that there are about 18 million NRIs in the United States (these include green card holders, H1-B workers and illegal immigrants) with only about 15,600 NRI divorces annually. However, the number of NRI divorces is increasing every year (Jha, 2006; Reeves & Bennett, 2004). These statistics have led me to an investigation of dissolution. What is causing the increase in the number of NRI divorces? As I delved into the literature in this area, it was clear that the relationships between NRIs and their dissolution were not widely studied. I was drawn to investigate the causes and communication patterns that lead to dissolution of marriages within the Indian community. The goal of this project is to investigate the reasons NRIs in Silicon Valley give for dissolving intimate relationships, and to examine the cultural implications of these reasons.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

My involvement with this project began in June 2006 when I first read about dissolution of relationships in an online interpersonal communication class. I was immediately drawn to understand the communication patterns, cultural influences, and the other factors leading to a reduction in or termination of committed relationships. As I pursued the same topic in my other graduate classes in Fall 2006, I gathered the existent literature surrounding the concept of dissolutions, culture, and related factors. For instance, *Gulf News* recently published an article demonstrating concerns on high divorce rates among NRIs in the Silicon Valley. As Jha (2006, para.8) reported, “On an average, three out of five Non Resident Indians (NRI) marriages in the US are dissolved in less than a year and a large number of them do not cross more than two years, which is necessary to obtain a green card.” Other recent data gathered and published by Reeves and Bennett (2004, p.7) suggested that out of 1.9 million Asian Indians living in the United States, 2.4% reported divorces in comparison to a divorce rate of 1.1% in India.

Lawina (2003, para.20) validates this problem by quoting Dr. Sangeeta Gupta, who explains that, “Last census data showed that Indian Americans were getting divorced at a higher rate than their parents: The divorce rate is rising so you will see more singles in their late 30's and early 40's”

Gupta is a co-founder of Gupta Consulting Company; she won UCLA's Cary McWilliams Award for her research on divorce among Indian American women.

The new research and statistics swarmed my mind with many questions, such as: is the very traditional way of formation of Indian American relationships not working here? Is the online matchmaking process a cause as the family connections are no longer involved? Are there more "mixed" marriages within the Indian American community? What is the "cultural" dimension that is leading to dissolution? If there is historical evidence that the arranged marriage system has been successful in Indian society, than what is driving the current generation to look for new avenues of relationship formation? My next step was to delve into the literature on the dissolution stage of relationships to get insight into this issue.

LITERATURE REVIEW

What causes break-ups?

Although the termination of relationships has not been adequately investigated, some researchers have studied the break-ups of adults and young-adults, as well as dating and married couples. Baxter (1984) stated that relationships dissolve in several different trajectories depending on how individuals approach the dissolution process. It is therefore difficult to establish a single set of steps that capture the phenomena. Supporting this argument, Duck (1982) demonstrated that dissolutions must be viewed as a process rather than single events. Baxter (1982) also stated that couples growing apart mark break-ups, which involves them tumbling from crisis to crisis. Cleek and Pearson (1985) surveyed and studied divorce and identified communication problems as the major factor leading to divorce. Other factors include unhappiness, incompatibility with spouse, emotional abuse, financial problems, sexual problems, spouse's alcohol abuse, spousal infidelity, and physical abuse.

These causes were validated by a study published online by the American Academy of Matrimonial Lawyers, who also considered poor communication as the main cause of divorce. They also identified other causes such as financial problems; lack of commitment to the marriage; a change in priorities; infidelity; unmet needs; addictions and substance abuse; physical, sexual, or emotional abuse; and a lack of conflict resolution skills (American Academy of Matrimonial Lawyers, p. 1).

Examining the various factors and the studies on the dissolution of relationships, I now discuss the literature review of this study, organizing it around critical questions and themes:

What invokes dissolution?

Hill, Rubin, and Peplau (1976) conducted a longitudinal investigation of dissolution on college-age students and found that similarity and involvement were the chief components in the decision to stay together or break-up. They stated that similarities in educational plans,

intelligence, attractiveness, and being equally involved in the relationship were the most common reasons for the couples to remain together, whereas couples who were the least similar and most unequally involved were more likely to break-up (Hill, Rubin, & Pepalu, 1976). Another factor, which notably plays a pivotal role in relationship decisions, is the satisfaction and involvement of the length of the relationship. Simpson (1987) stated that couples who stay together tend to be highly satisfied, emotionally and psychologically close, dating for long periods, and sexually active. Simpson also found that individuals who perceive that it would be difficult to find a suitable alternative to their current partner also tended to remain in relationships. In his research, romantic couples who had high levels of satisfaction and involvement in their past relationships were reported to have a more painful break-up. They were also more likely to experience high levels of distress, which Simpson (1987) stated is directly related to one's involvement in a relationship. On a similar note, Douglass (1988) found that individuals who experienced the highest levels of post-dissolution distress reported that their relationships prior to their break ups were highly satisfying and that they were highly involved with their partner.

What are the trajectories and turning points of dissolution process?

Through extensive research on this subject, I found Baxter was the most commonly cited scholar in the various studies. Baxter (1984) defines a turning point as “any event or occurrence that is associated with change in relationship” (p.470). Turning points were also familiarized by other scholars. These turning points and graphical interpretations serve as excellent tools to understand relational processes and change. Studies on relationship termination suggest that one of the most significant ways in which time or a specific event enters into the coherence of a relationship is the link between the relationship’s past and present.

Baxter (1984) found that the history of a relationship is significantly related to the partner’s current communicative practices of remembering incidences from the past. She presented twenty-six turning points and stated that turning points are significant events related to relationship satisfaction, met communication, commitment, and partnership agreement. She also found that the turning points involved relational talk, or messages about the nature of the relationship. In another study that examined how couples jointly reconstruct their turning points, Baxter and Pittman (2001) found that quality time, passion, get-to know-you-time, and exclusivity as the turning points that were most prominent in couples’ recollection. That is, these four turning points were the most common types and emerged in couples’ reminiscing, telling stories, mementos, and other reflections. Similar research supported the same doctrine of turning points concerning relational satisfaction and partner agreement (Graham, 1997).

Baxter and Bullis (1986) suggested that using turning points as a unit of analysis to study the relationship dynamics is a useful point of view to examine communication and meaning in relationship development. The turning points were initially introduced by Bolton in 1961, and

further investigated and defined by Baxter & Bullis (1986) and Bullis (1986). Baxter (1984) presented the five assumptions of turning points. The five assumptions taken into account while studying turning points were that relationships are initiated, maintained, dissolved, redefined, and reformed primarily through communication. This research (Baxter & Bullis, 1986) examined how it was desirable to develop new frameworks and language to talk about relationships involving former spouses and binuclear family systems. These relations did not break suddenly, the researchers argue, but factors such as loss of trust, absence of humor, inability to see bright future together, and loss of commitment slowly built up over time and resulted in dissolution. These are the processes referred to as trajectories. There may be one single event that ultimately leads to dissolution but most often the dissolution process develops over time. It is at this time that researchers have found that people start looking for someone else and the closeness to that new person can then become the turning point of dissolution (Baxter & Bullis, 1986).

What role does closeness and commitment play?

Uncovering the details of what invokes dissolution, scholars demonstrate that the feeling of closeness, solidarity, commitment, and involvement play a vital role in deciding if the dissolution is being approached. Rusbult (1980) stated that feelings of commitment and satisfaction were two critical components of successful relationships. Rusbult also provided the definition of commitment as "the tendency to maintain a relationship and to feel psychologically attached" (p.102). He defined satisfaction as the "positivity of affect or attraction to one's relationship" (p. 102). Additionally, the old and new relationship's success depends on an individual's degree of commitment and satisfaction in the relationship based on rewards, costs, investments, and alternatives. The model developed by Rusbult (1980) indicated that individuals should be more satisfied in relationships they perceive as having more rewards than costs. In general, commitment should increase as the value of the relationship increases (Rusbult, 1980). Some studies refer to control as another important feature which binds relationships. Control mutuality refers to the degree that the partners agree on the power balance in the relationship (Stephen, 1987). These researchers believed that both relational partners should agree on who has the power in the relationship. In addition, attempts to control the relationship unilaterally have been linked to relational dissatisfaction and misunderstanding (Canary & Stafford, 1991).

Does the old break- up have an impact on the new one?

Stephen (1987) found that individuals who self-attribute individual break-ups tend to cope better with dissolution and more adequately adjust for future involvements than individuals who attribute break-ups to their partners. Furthermore, the initiator of break-ups typically exercises less depression and loneliness and feels more relieved and happier than the individual who is left (Hill, Rubin & Peplau, 1979). Feeney and Noller (1992) found that some individuals find it hard to cope with a breakup because they were so dependent upon their partner for support. Several studies (Baxter, 1984; Cupach & Metts, 1986; Lee, 1984) demonstrate that individuals are impacted differently depending on how their relationship dissolves.

Other Studies found that painful and stressful breakups follow highly emotionally involved, committed, and satisfying relationships (Feeney & Noller, 1992; Fine & Sacher, 1997; Simpson 1987). Moreover, these researchers found that break-ups are less distressing when they are attributed to internal factors. For example, individuals better cope with break-ups when they choose to leave for a lack of satisfaction than when their partner leaves them for another partner.

Are there any common communication patterns?

Gottman (1994) studied the communication patterns of satisfied and dissatisfied couples and examined their differences. He discovered that dissatisfied couples more often engaged in destructive communication patterns than satisfied couples. Dissatisfied couples are also more likely to engage in criticism, defensiveness, contempt, and withdrawal. One of his interviewees reported that she told her ex-husband, "I don't think I want to know you anymore. All you do is make me feel bad about myself." In saying this, she clearly stated a desire not to see him anymore. However, later she wondered if she said or did the right thing. His observation is that disengages begin the process by withdrawing emotionally from the relationships first. Stronger and more forceful messages are used later. When a person is sufficiently hurt by emotional or physical abuse or infidelity, they are motivated to exit the relationship quickly.

Dickson (1995) categorized couples based on communication patterns. According to him, connected couples tell stories that include agreement and mutual confirmation. Functional couples demonstrated respect, validation, and support while telling individual stories. Dysfunctional couples exhibited contradictions and disagreements. Using the destructive communication patterns in dysfunctional couples, Gottman (1994) was able to predict divorce with 94% efficiency during his research.

Does culture play a role in dissolutions?

Studies have indicated that cultural differences may also influence relationships. Research has established the importance of family in Mexican American culture (Keefe, 1984; Vega, 1990). In contrast, Black men and women are less likely to desire marriage, are less likely to agree that marriage is for life, and perceive fewer benefits associated with marriage than their White and Hispanic counterparts (Bulanda & Brown, 2006). Marriage is considered a holy union in the Hindu faith. "One is incomplete and considered unholy if they do not marry" (Rao, 1982, p.60). Separation or divorce may stigmatize a woman in India, dropping her social status and reducing her social network, sometimes causing community members or ex-partner's relatives to reject her (Bruce, 1995). Religion discourages the divorce process in many South Asian countries. Marriage among Muslims is civil and contractual, whereas it is eternal for Hindus (Shaikh, 1998).

Based on my research on the impact of culture on relationships, and my interest in NRIs, I found it interesting to investigate dissolutions in the cultural context of India.

THE INDIAN CONTEXT

Scenarios of relationship dissolution.

As I decided to work closely with Non Resident Indians, there were a few scenarios I came across during my research on this topic. Depending upon the various visa and immigration status of NRIs in the United States, matrimonial and personal relationships may be affected. Some of the common cases related to visa and immigration status that I found are described below.

The first scenario involves one partner who is on a Temporary work/study visa (H1B) while the other partner is on a dependent visa (H4) visa. The partner who is on the H4 visa cannot work and is dependent on the other. The lack of a social network and the inability to work makes this partner depressed and lonely, leading to marital problems. Websites such as www.saheli.com and www.H4Help.org have been highlighting these issues.

The second scenario involves one of the partners being a U.S. resident and the other partner comes to the United States after marriage. Typically, parents who believe in traditional Indian matrimonial systems think it would be wiser to find a suitable partner from India for their daughter or son. For example, they might think that a young man of Indian descent born and brought up in the United States would be too Americanized for their daughter. While it might be assumed that a young man raised in India would consider marriage as sacramental as they do in India, often parents are proved wrong as they do not really know whether the young man they chose is actually interested in being naturalized as a U.S. citizen. A few years after the marriage, the young man may acquire a green card and say good-bye to the girl. Also in this case, scholars believe that NRI grooms look for Indian girls because they want to be in a company of a wife who has not been Americanized in terms of social openness. They are open to having girlfriends in the United States, but for marriage they prefer a stay-at-home wife who is brought up in a more conventional manner so that she can reinstate traditional Indian family values. Sometimes, when the roles are switched the parents of the young man born and brought up in the United States wish to acquire a bride from India in the hope that they will find a person of their own culture. But when these young women come to the United States, they are often either victims of domestic violence or the differences between the partners are so great that the relationships are quite often terminated. This problem is so prominent that the Ministry of External Affairs, the Ministry of Overseas Indian Affairs, and some Indian embassies have added welfare officers to assist Indian women caught up in bad marriages overseas.

The third case involves generations of Indian Americans who are brought up in the United States. Both the partners are brought up in the United States and do not share the same philosophy of wedlock as their parents. Thus, the couple is not able to escape the parental pressure to get married (Lawina, 2003). These partners find it difficult to balance parental expectations and their own individual needs, and thus cannot cope up with marital pressures.

After reading about these scenarios that are published in popular newspapers and magazines, I did some research on what could be the possible factors leading to an increase of NRI divorces.

Factors influencing NRI dissolution

In the online newspaper *Little India*, Dr. Sangeeta Gupta, whose research includes cross-cultural issues and immigrant family dynamics, indicated that:

Indian Americans are looking for some kind of chemistry; they want a different type of relationship based on companionship and love. They reject the premise that love comes after marriage while for the couples born and brought up in India, love after marriage is generally accepted. (Lawina, 2003, para.20)

Studies have shown that intercultural couples start out their relationships with a higher risk for an unsuccessful union (Brown, 1987), and are more prone to marital dissatisfaction and divorce (Brown, 2006). Most NRI marriages are between people of the same origin; however, most of the partners are intrinsically of different cultures based on the places where they were raised. NRI partners are more often termed as “Americanized.”

Indian culture and its role in dissolution.

In India there are no casual marriages; marriages are mainly arranged by the parents or the elders of the family considering religion, caste, creed, economic status, languages, etc. These marriages are sermonized by religious ceremonies. An Indian marriage is a sacrament involving traditional ceremonies and convictions and is believed to be life lasting. The governing principle of *sanjog* is that the couple is destined to be husband and wife by the divine will. The Hindu belief is that a husband and a wife are destined to be together for several births.

I consider the increase in NRI divorce as somewhat of a paradox since NRIs have been known to be intimately attached to their Indian cultural values and mostly prefer arranged marriages within their communities. The marriage vows involve the commitment to remain together forever as husband and wife in love and in the performance of all family and social obligations.

After examining the possible causes of Indian NRI dissolution, I decided to interview NRIs who have been involved in a dissolved relationship in the past in order to uncover the reasons for the dissolution and if there are any common themes or patterns.

METHOD

Examining the factors that lead to dissolution of relationships among NRIs requires that the research be able to identify the communication patterns which occur repeatedly within the relationships between the NRI couples. Themes describe recurring ideas that take place when individuals communicate. Owen (1984) defined a theme as the “patterned semantic issue or locus

of concern around which a couple's interaction centers" (p.274). Thus, in order to describe a recurring and unifying factors leading to dissolution, thematic analysis had been chosen for this research paper.

Participants

Eight participants (4 women and 4 men) voluntarily consented to be involved in this research investigation. The mean age of the participants was 26 years. Participants were invited through advertisements on websites and online forums, and some were recruited through contact with NGO's and by word of mouth. In the beginning of September, 2007, advertisements were posted on popular websites Craigslist and Sulekha to invite NRI's to be part of this research. Two of the participants were recruited through these advertisements. Four participants were recruited with the help of the non-profit organization India Vision Foundation and a Legal Aid Foundation called SEVA. Two more participants who agreed to be a part of this study were recruited by word of mouth.

The inclusion criteria for the participants to be selected for this study were: a) they must be a non-resident Indian; b) they must have been in a dissolved relationship (divorce/separation/break-up); and c) they must have some English communication skills. All of the participants who responded were from the San Francisco Bay area. Four of these participants had arranged marriages, three participants had loving marriages, and one of them was not married but lived with their partner for over a year. Six of these participants had been through a divorce, one of them is still pursuing the legal process, and one is separated. Six of these participants are now single. One of them has remarried. The average period of the participants' divorce/separation was 3 years. Two of the participants have children.

Procedure

Semi-structured interviews were conducted in the beginning of September with the eight participants and were all completed by the end of the month. A plain language statement, stating who I am and what is my purpose of this research along with a consent form were given to each participant prior to each interview. The consent form indicated that the interviews were voluntary and that they would be audio taped for data collection purpose.

Before the interviews began, I tried to carefully create a comfortable environment. Though the interviews were conducted in English language, knowledge of Hindi language made my interaction with the participants dynamic and significant for the investigation as I was able to understand some of the native terms and became actively involved in the conversation. There were several considerations I had to make while working with people who had been in a dissolved relationship. For example, I tried to demonstrate cultural sensitivity by demonstrating empathy while asking questions and interacting with the participants.

There were sixteen semi-structured interview questions which aimed to discover the factors leading to dissolutions (see Appendix A). Each interview took 30 to 45 minutes. Various venues were chosen to for the interviews. Most of the interviews were conducted at a friend's office in San Jose. The conference room of the building was very helpful for asking questions without distractions and offered great sound quality for recording purposes. One female participant suggested we meet outside a café in Palo Alto, as she believed that her family members would become suspicious of the interviewing process. I agreed to the participant's request, which was consistent with the empathetic, flexible and culturally sensitive approach that I adopted in conducting this research. Another male participant was also interviewed at Stanford University area because of his inability to travel to San Jose.

Data Analysis

Data was analyzed by transcribing all of the recorded audio information from the semi-structured interviews. Thematic analysis of the preliminary findings was aimed at searching for the reasons (i.e. factors) that affected dissolution of relationships among NRIs. The three themes that were uncovered in this research and discussed later in this section were: 1) gender differences, 2) cultural forces, and 3) reluctance to seek support when needed.

In order to analyze the data, a transcript for each participant's interview was compiled and read several times, line by line, in order to gain a sense of what was occurring in each interview. For every interview, a response emphasizing a significant aspect of the dissolution was read and noted carefully, followed by a reading of other significant aspects mentioned in other interviews. When similarities were found in more than one transcript (thus meeting the reoccurrence criteria describe by Owen, 1984), those clusters of meaning were considered evidence of a theme. In addition, key words and phrases which were repeated throughout the respondents' comments were also isolated as thematic evidence.

During the first thematic review of the data, the themes that had the most apparent evidence were parental pressure, peer pressure, and the pressure from family. This phase focused on responses directed towards the differences in the couples because of the gender roles in the family.

After the initial three themes were isolated, the groups of the themes were then reviewed to determine whether they should be combined or if they should be considered sub-themes. It is important to note that the evidence for the themes appeared at instances other than the respondents' answers to the question directly pertaining to the theme. For example, respondents spoke of parental pressure under the question of challenges adapting to each other and under external pressure that led to the break-up.

After the data had been sorted according to the themes, each theme was separated by the reasons the respondent gave for a given problem in the relationship. For example, in the cultural forces

theme, a tally was completed taking into account the type of external pressure which the partners felt was responsible for their break-up. Notes were taken to describe the similarities occurring between each question and its response accordingly.

After the initial analysis, the data were once again examined for evidence of interrelationships among the themes. Respondents' comments were selected as evidence of the interrelationship among the themes. For example, if the interviewee mentioned that they did not seek any professional help to avoid being exposed to their community even though they thought that could have been helpful, this was taken as evidence to support an interrelationship between the theme of reluctance to seek support and cultural forces.

Reliability checks were also conducted by two graduate students who were not affiliated with the study or had knowledge of it. Four quotations from each theme were selected randomly. The names of the themes and their definitions were given to the graduate students. After they read the definitions, the graduate students were given the 12 randomly selected quotations and asked to read the quotations and place each one into the theme which they believed best matched the quotation.

During the first reliability check, the graduate student was not told that she had been presented with four quotations from each theme. The graduate student matched 9 of the 12 quotations with the current themes. Two of the three quotations that were matched incorrectly had elements of the two related themes. The quotations were clarified to reflect only one theme per quotation. During the second reliability check, the graduate student was told that she had been presented with four quotations from each theme. The graduate student correctly matched all of the quotations with the respective themes.

RESULTS

Three themes were identified in this study: gender differences, cultural forces, and reluctance to seek professional support. Each theme is defined and described below. Representative comments have been presented to illustrate the themes and demonstrate how they contributed to the dissolution of the relationships.

Theme 1: Gender differences.

The first theme is defined as the gender bias prevalent in Indian society, which clearly favors males over females. The bias ranges from doing household chores, to being in control, to the ability to spend more money. The interview responses described a pattern which indicated that the female respondents believed that the men in the relationship were in control and that they disregarded the women's independence. Some of the quotations under this theme are (Note: names used in the quotes are not real): "He believed that I must cook and clean, that's what I am supposed to do" (Rina, participant 1); "But what happens is that there is this whole idea that

compromise is very important in the relationship. And the girl compromises more and tries to deal with it” (Mavini, participant 5); “My father-in-law was feeding everything in my husband’s head and said, ‘married girls should not hang out with any other men except her husband . . .’ Basically he was like that to his wife too. He didn’t let her use the remote control for the TV. This started affecting my husband’s attitude towards me” (Mavini, participant 5); “Well, I am a cool person but I did not like her getting too friendly with my friends. I think an Indian girl gets more respect being not very friendly with many male members” (Brinsh, participant 1); “You should not wear western outfits at home. There’s no point getting over independent”(Mohinder , participant 4); “He accepted me despite the fact that I was a working woman” (Shalini, participant 3); “I was prepared that it’s going to be me who will have to adjust the most”(Shalini, participant 3); “I was living with my wife and brother-in-law in their house. I felt like a ghar jamai and ended up having conflicts with my wife out of frustration. This might be an ego but I said Jeet, let’s not stay here” (Sameer, participant 7); and “For her, her brother was a priority. She did not come to pick me up the first day I landed in the US. For her, it was more important to take care of her brother’s office work than to receive me” (Sameer, participant 7).

The responses indicate that the gender bias appeared to result in confrontation and frustration for the partners, and was a contributing factor in the dissolution of the relationship. Most of them had arranged marriages. Even though most of the participants worked in a modern sphere like IT, the men were still very conventional and traditional in terms of gender roles. While the women earn and contribute financially to the family, they are nevertheless expected to play a traditional role at home.

Theme 2: Cultural Forces

The second theme is a broad category labeled “cultural forces.” Nearly all of the participants contributed to this theme, which was not limited to any one interview question. For example, some participants responded that their families and parents played a major role in initiating and giving positive approval for their relationship. Other interviewees said that interference of their spouses’ parents led to troubles in the couples’ communication and was one of the reasons behind their break-up. Some of the quotes that reflected this theme are: “He came to India only for the purpose of marriage. My parents thought he was a good guy and I agreed to see him . . . I felt that my husband got married just to get rid of the marriage pressure. You know, how it is in India. For him it was like get married, get married. But then it was a way of obliging his parents, and that was it!” (Shalini, participant 3); “It was important for me to see how she behaves in front of my parents. Only then I could decide if she was a potential life partner” (Brinsh, participant 2); “I was going through this hell here but did not want to involve my parents although they were responsible for making me marry him”(Rina, participant 1); “I was only eighteen when I got married. I visited India and agreed to marry because my brother had already found this match for me” (Mohinder, participant 4); “I moved to Phoenix and after one month her whole family moved there. I felt as if I was a fool. After all, I have been trying to run away

from them all this time” (Sameer, participant 5); “Indian culture is all dependent on the respect for parents. My mother nurtured me till I was 25 years old. I never picked a glass from the kitchen on my own and when my mother came to the US, she saw me and my wife fighting every single day. I can’t compromise on being disrespectful and paying less attention to my mother”(Sameer, participant 7); “Although this was an intercultural marriage, my parents were okay. But his parents were always reluctant. They kept feeding things in his mind and he was all ears for his father” (Mavini, participant 5); “To be really honest, the time it really got challenging was when her family got involved. Her family guiding her to what they thought was right. Umm...ignoring and disregarding my interests and my feelings” (Bikram, participant 6); “They had a strong influence on her. Where as I would understand that this being our relationship, our understanding on how we think we want to live our lives and stuff” (Bikram, participant 6); “It was this son’s duty towards his parents. There wasn’t a desire in him for having a partner for a lifetime who can stay together and enjoy” (Harjeet, participant 8); “There was a lot of distraction from his family which actually did initiate the spark of conflict between the two of us”(Harjeet, participant 8); “We are Indians and are very traditional. Probably that’s what killed my marriage. She was in a way very traditional. She took the responsibility of taking care of her brother. This was because when her mother was alive, she told her to take care of him” (Sameer, participant 7).

The respondents’ comments indicate that parents play a vital role in fixing marriages for their children. Indian children have a lot of respect for their parents and feel obliged to listen to their decision. However, it was also noticeable that in some cases the participants did not feel that they were ready for marriage, believing that they thought the decision was right only because their parents believed it. There is also evidence that when the relationships were on the verge of separation, some participants showed reluctance to tell their parents who were still in India while others said that having a “yes word” from the family to dissolve the relationship was important to them. However, there was a clear pattern of the involvement of parents in each interaction.

Theme 3: Reluctance to seek professional support.

The final theme described by all of the participants was labeled reluctance to seek professional support. The majority of the participants reported that they sought help from their close friends. An interesting observation was that most of them said a professional support system would have been helpful, but 90% of the participants did not seek it and did not know where to ask for help. The participants commented: “Frankly I don’t think so, and I might be wrong. Oh is there any help for the community out there? I have no idea” (Brinesh); “No, I think I had this confidence of taking the decision, and I went ahead. The support is not good enough. I tried to approach the lawyers here, but it’s a costly affair. I had financial problems. I didn’t come here with much money. And knowing that the kind of person my husband was, I did not take money from him while separating” (Shalini); “Especially women when they come from far off countries, and they have no social and emotional support here” (Rina); “I would talk to my close friends. Mostly I

would ask questions to myself, tried to really understand this. But my partner did not react in this situation. But I think better counseling would have been an answer. Not her parents or cousins feeding stuff in her head. She could have at least taken enough time to understand and not jump into conclusions.” (Bikram); “I think counseling would have worked. If we had talked to somebody who is neutral, knows his job well and have the intelligence to understand our situation. Counseling might have penetrated our thoughts. May be my parents or her thoughts which I deeply regret” (Sameer); “I don’t know if there’s anything like help for the south Asian community. I have no idea. Not really! I did not seek any help. Just searched for lawyers through a reference” (Sameer); and “Western culture is more like seeking external professional help. I would say that professional help would have made a difference, professional help from the same community or culture. There are spiritual places also” (Mavini).

Respondents’ comments illustrate that most of them did want to get support. Most of them understand that counseling or professional help would have been helpful, but there is no clear pattern to describe why it was not sought in any of these cases. It is clear that the majority of the participants were aware of the facilities but unfortunately most of the participants left the interaction by saying “it would have been helpful.”

DISCUSSION

This study examined the factors leading to dissolution of relationships among NRIs in the Silicon Valley. In the interviews I conducted for this project, the participants gave interesting and relevant information from which three distinct themes emerged: gender bias, cultural forces, and reluctance to seek support. The three global themes provided a coherent explanation of some of the reasons that leads to dissolution among NRIs.

The first of these themes provide an insight into marriage as still being considered a gendered institution in India as well as among the NRIs in the United States. The participants gave rich descriptions of the differences in labor, responsibilities, expression of sexual intimacy, and psychological orientation. In the conventional Indian family, the wife’s subservient position curbs her individuality and she assumes a secondary role while the husband devotes his time to his career. NRI couples in the Silicon Valley who have had arranged marriages frequently cite the desire to end the marriage because of the clash between the Silicon Valley culture and their notion of a traditional marriage. Although many couples who have had arranged marriages work in the ultra-modern sphere of information technologies, often the men are still very traditional in terms of gender roles. While the women contribute financially to the family, they are also expected to play a more traditional role at home. It is possible that when both partners are upwardly mobile in their professional careers, their egos come into play. Apparently, irrespective of whether the woman works outside the home or not, it is expected that she is largely responsible for household duties and child care.

From the second theme, cultural forces, it can be clearly seen that parents play a significant institutional role in uniting the couple together. The adult children trust their parents for making the decision to choose the right life partner for them. Parents watch with peripheral interest the matching of horoscopes, the meeting of the families, and finally the meeting of the two important players in the future union. From what evidence is available, a large percentage of these marriages seem to work. Whatever may be the path which led to marriage, arranged or otherwise, there are societal pressures with the onus on the couple to keep the marriage stable.

NRIs who settle in the Silicon Valley exist within a larger social context. This social context forms and shapes the values, expectations, and beliefs of the partner and constrains their pattern of interactions as a couple. It is unfortunate that parents from middle-class homes, very often the mothers (as cited by the interviewees), have such a strong desire to hold on to the reins of power and such difficulty in letting go that they intervene too much in their children's life, often leading to conflicts between the couple.

According to the findings of the third theme, it is clear that NRIs are reluctant to seek support from professional services, private counselors, and agencies. This is in part because most of the professional help programs require self initiative and a commitment to regular visits. Most of the Indian customs are family based. For a family to have a divorced child can affect the social ranking of the entire family, including the unmarried siblings. When families arrange a marriage, they make sure that their son or daughter is married into a family that has a good reputation, which can be translated to no history of dissolved relationships in the family. Hence, the couples do not like to seek support outside the extended family because they fear being socially exposed for having marriage difficulties within the family.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

As I conclude my research paper, I believe that the goal in a marriage is to become united in purpose and in spirit and not to overpower or control the other. If both parties are keen to save the marriage, resolution is possible. Indian couples need to understand the gender roles in the family. Preliminary results indicated that when gender roles were defined, it was easier to conform to a pattern. But today, with the emancipation of NRI women, their economic independence and the new value system, marriage has assumed a new face. Further analyses revealed that couples do not exist in a social vacuum, but within a larger social context. When two people live together, each must yield to the other. In most marriages, husband and wives make sacrifices in order to adjust to each other. However, when both insist on their rights, acting as independent and sovereign entities, clashes are inevitable. Based on the present findings, it appears that the answer to the problem could be found if Indian families bring up their children to accept the fact that gender roles are not necessarily defined traditionally and that men and women have to share the burden of work and child-rearing tempered with tolerance and understanding.

Present findings supports that Indian marriage is an integral part of social traditions and rituals in which both side family members get involved emotionally in the relationship and the community members participate to give blessings to the couple. Results indicate that an increasing number of couples experience distress and incompatibility due to the interference of the parents and family members; it would be good to realize the independence of the couple. Another interesting finding of this study was the reluctance of the NRI couples to seek professional help. One explanation to this is the fear of becoming socially ostracized and the other is sticking to the traditional conservative societal views where the institution of marriage—“shaadi” in Hindi—is revered and divorce is frowned upon.

Other moderating influences (e.g. choice of food, spending habits and compatibility in learning things together) did not seem to significantly impact the dissolution of the relationships.

In the future, it would be interesting to investigate if the present results can be extended to NRIs everywhere in the world. Researchers may also want to examine the role culture plays in the process of dissolution. Present studies emphasize the direct communication between the two people involved in a relationship and the events which contribute to the entire trajectory of a dissolution process. It would be enriching to extend the research which takes into consideration the external factors like the influence of the family, culture, and the accessibility of professional help for the couple.

Though studying theories helps in understanding the process of dissolution, there is no concrete way of exactly defining a process or a pattern leading to it. Clearly, it would be of great benefit to the social science field if some communication instruments were devised for individuals to identify a potential dissolution. The idea would be to help individuals to identify the flaws in their previous relationships so as to improve on them when committing to future relationships or handling present relationships. Such a knowledge base could be provided through forums or counseling services which are relatively more accessible to individuals than a medium like the internet which maintains anonymity and does not require heavy expenditure.

LIMITATIONS

I chose to conduct interviews with the NRIs who have experienced a dissolved relationship in the past. This helped me gain insight into how they perceive their experiences and the communication patterns which lead to dissolution. However, there are several limitations that should be acknowledged in my method. First, although interviews were a great help in exploring individual experiences and outcomes, it was challenging for me as the interviewer to empathize with common outcomes since each individual has a different story. Another limitation of this study was a relatively small sample size. Because of the reluctance of the people to participate in a study dealing with relationship dissolution, it was difficult to recruit a large number of divorced individuals to gather more and varied data. A third limitation is that while NRIs are all over the

United States, this research paper does not include participants outside the San Francisco Bay area. A fourth limitation involves the type of participants who volunteered for this study. All of them are educated and relatively affluent professionals who were in relatively stable, non-problematic relationships. As such, the study does not include interviews from deserted spouses, people involved in domestic violence, people dealing with illegal matrimonial or immigration issues, or low income people. A final limitation of this qualitative study is that it does not produce statistics and information from which generalizations can be made to a larger population group.

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APPENDIX A

Interview questions

Questions: Some of the interview questions that were asked:

1. How did you meet your spouse?
2. What was your immigration status when you initiated this relationship?
3. How and when did both of you decide to commit to this relationship?
4. What was the relationship like during the period right after the relationship was established?
5. Did you face any challenges adapting to each other after the relationship was established? If so, what were they?
6. Did you notice any significant differences between you and your partner? If so, what were they? When did you notice them?
7. How did you realize that the relationship was not going in the right direction? Do you remember a critical event like a single event, fight, and argument, confrontation that altered your relationship?
8. What was your living arrangement at the time? Were you living together mostly or were you apart?
9. When did you think about splitting up, what prompted those thoughts?
10. What do you think led to the break up? Were there external pressures, internal pressures, both?
11. How did you talk through your concerns with your spouse? How were you two communicating with each other during this period?
12. Did you or your partner try to do anything different to improve the relationship? If so, what was it? What happened as a result?
13. Did you seek out any support or assistance in dealing with this situation? If so, what was it? How helpful was it?
14. What sort of help and support would have been most useful to you in this situation?
15. Do you think there is adequate help available for divorce support in the Silicon Valley for the South Asian Community?

Publisher note:

Factors affecting Dissolution of Relationships among Non Resident Indians
by **Praneet Kaur**

Published by **The International Journal of Indian Psychology** (www.ijip.in)

Under the **ISSN: 2348-5396**

In Special Issue Criteria: This Special Issue part of Volume 4, 2016



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Edited, Printed and Published by RED'SHINE Publication. (India) Inc.
on behalf of the RED'MAGIC Networks. Inc. (www.redmac.in)

86: Shradhdha, 88 Navamuvada, Lunawada, Gujarat-389230

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